

Refugees at Myanmar-Thai border joyful despite persecution

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Blooming Night is a Myanmar refugee living just across the Thai border who has spent most of her 50-something years hiding in the jungle. But when she isn't in actual hiding, she is bringing relief to her people — the Karen — through physical supplies and through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“She is a missionary to her own people,” said John Upton, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and president of the [Baptist World Alliance](#).

Upton was part of a seven-member [Refugee camps along Myanmar BWA delegation](#) that visited refugee camps along the volatile border recently. Organized by Patsy Davis, executive director the [BWA's women's department](#), the visit preceded the global organization's week-long annual gathering in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Karen are among several minority ethnic groups in the remote mountains and jungles of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) who have been fighting government control since the country's independence from Britain in 1948 - one of the world's longest-running separatist insurgencies.

For decades thousands of refugees have fled the conflict, landing in camps just across the border in Thailand. The [Thailand Burma Border Consortium](#), an NGO that works in the region, estimates as many as 150,000 people live in temporary settlements. Thai officials say they want to return them to Myanmar.

“The conditions there are like something you would imagine from 200 years ago,” Upton said.

Davis agreed the conditions are grim. “The people literally have nothing. Nothing. We went to offer humanitarian aid, but mostly we went to encourage Blooming Night. We wanted to show her that Baptist women around the world support her.”

In recognition of her birthday next month, the delegation presented Blooming Night with a large birthday cake and presents.

“Here is a woman who is hunted by two governments, who swims across the river at the border at the risk of her own life, who has to navigate mine fields, who knows the hardness of life, who has seen women horribly treated — raped by soldiers of the Myanmar army,” said Upton. “She has seen all this, but when she opened her birthday card that played music, she jumped and then she laughed and then she cried. And for a few minutes this woman that I just described turns into a little girl.

“Playful, giddy, hugging, laughing, she goes to leave but can’t. She goes around the circle one more time before she could leave. She turned into the little girl that she was never able to be. That transformation is a memory I will always take with me.”

An estimated 30 to 40 percent of Karens are Christians, and Davis said for many of the refugees, “Their only joy is Jesus.”

Davis said the number of churches in the camp has increased from 12 two

years ago to 20, in addition to the church where the BWA delegation worshiped.

That worship service, attended by about 500 people, was a wet one, she and Upton said. It had rained torrentially all night but had cleared by morning. The sanctuary was flooded when debris clogged the river and it spilled over its banks.

“Water started coming in the back of the church,” said Upton. “During a prayer, it would advance another pew. During one long prayer it moved up three rows. It came all the way up to the front row of pews. People in the back were sitting in water almost knee-deep and nobody knew how deep it was going to get. But nobody left.”

He added, laughing, “It started receding while I was preaching, so I figure I preached the flood back.”

The singing in the two-hour service is what impressed Davis and Upton most, as well as the palpable joy in the faces of the worshipers.

“One lady, whose husband and child were killed by the soldiers, greeted us with such a smile you would never know the tragedies she experienced,” Davis said.

The day started at 5 a.m. “when they were singing during the prayer time,” Davis added. “At 6:30 was the women’s Bible study, and that was just the beginning of the day!”

Davis said the churches in the camps include descendants of Karen converted to Christianity by Ann and Adoniram Judson, American Baptist missionaries who spent 40 years in Burma during the first half of the 19th century.

“They [the churches] learned well the lesson of sacrifice,” said Davis.

“Three of the 20 churches gave an offering of \$500 to the BWA women’s department. These are people who have nothing who did this. We should be totally ashamed.”

Christians in the camps have started a Bible college and seminary and are ministering to abused women and children. In addition, Blooming Night and others have helped [resettle refugees](#) in other countries, including the United States.